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ABSTRACT

The graduate school at the University of Michigan (UM) is seeking to identify the characteristics of a high quality graduate education, taking into account various aspects of quality that are susceptible to numerical analysis as well as those that are not. Contemporary research universities are composed of many autonomous spheres (undergraduate and graduate education, professional education, and faculty research). Analysis shows that the spheres are interconnected, so when the climate for intellectual exchange is improved in one, others can be enhanced, improving also the sense of intellectual community of an entire university. The UM analysis produced focuses on factors which contribute to excellence in graduate education: academic potential of the students; numbers and capacities of the faculty; professional relationship between faculty and graduate students; the amount and nature of teaching done by graduate students; the academic culture of a department; student counseling about career goals; and depth, cohesiveness, and breadth of the curriculum. The UM Rackham School of Graduate Studies offers awards to outstanding teaching assistants and for distinguished dissertations, sponsors symposia and other programs to increase communication across academic disciplines; supports requests from departments for what they believe will enhance the climate for graduate education; and encourages mentorship. (SM)

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IMPROVING THE CLIMATE FOR GRADUATE EDUCATION AT A MAJOR RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

Susan S. Lipschutz, Associate Dean

Rackham School of Graduate Studies--The University of Michigan

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VOLUME XXI, NO 4 MAY 1988

Improving the Climate for Graduate Education at a Major Research University

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Issues such as the fragmentation of knowledge, the lack of personal contact between faculty and students, and the isolation of individual students are frequently noted in conjunction with undergraduate education at the largest research universities; they are less frequently acknowledged in graduate education. Without attempting to pattern the education they offer upon that found at liberal arts colleges—an outcome that is neither practical nor especially desirable—research universities can address these issues fruitfully in their own ways. At the Graduate School at The University of Michigan, we are seeking to identify the characteristics of a graduate education of high quality, taking into account those aspects of quality that are susceptible to numerical analysis (as is the usual practice), but also those that are not. With a small but energetic staff and some new ideas, we are focusing our limited resources in ways that attempt to make a virtue of our size, and we are working to infuse a personal touch into the graduate experience wherever we believe it can make a difference. What follows is a description of the analysis we have produced and the new approaches it has suggested to us.

I. What Factors Contribute to Excellence in Graduate Education?

To conclude that a graduate program is of high quality is a complex judgment that draws on many factors, only some of which can be measured numerically. The quality of a graduate program begins with the numbers and capacities of the faculty, whose achievements and reputations act as magnets for strong students. Through scholarly and research publications, performances, and other displays of creative work, these accomplishments can be measured and assessed. A second factor in determining program quality is the academic potential of the students themselves, as reflected in such familiar indicators as their undergraduate grade point averages (UGPAs), the degree of rigor of their undergraduate experiences, and their Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores. While these measures are useful, however, they serve only as partial indications of students' abilities. Qualities such as motivation for graduate study, perseverance, capacity for future growth, and leadership are not captured by them. Moreover, they reflect conditions at the point of entry, the moment at which students begin a graduate program. We also recognize that GRE scores (and probably also UGPAs) are inappropriate indicators of success in programs such as music performance and studio art. Nonetheless, given these caveats, numerical indicators are valuable both because they aid in the comparison of students across disciplines and because the presence of a number of students of very high ability in a graduate program is likely to have a synergistic effect upon both teaching and learning in that program.

In order to gauge the overall excellence of a graduate program, additional factors must be taken into account, such as the depth, cohesiveness, and breadth of the curriculum. One must consider the number and variety of the methodological requirements of a course of study and seek to learn whether these are still appropriate to the directions the field has taken. In addition, one needs to know whether the cognate requirements in a discipline or program are adequate,

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Dean Lipshutz

". . . we are seeking to identify the characteristics of a graduate education of high quality, taking into account those aspects of quality that are susceptible to numerical analysis . . . but also those that are not."

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and whether the number and type of languages required (or not required) remain optimal. The balance between faculty strengths and student interests within a department also contributes to the excellence of the education a student receives; an accommodation must be found between what students want to learn and what faculty are able to teach them. Distinguished faculty, talented students, and a well-considered curriculum are all necessary conditions for a graduate education of high quality.

". . . additional factors must be taken into account, such as the depth, cohesiveness, and breadth of the curriculum."

Then, there is the question of the professional relationship between faculty and graduate students. Mentorship follows different patterns in different disciplines, varying from working side-by-side daily in the physics laboratory or the painting studio to meeting very occasionally to discuss theoretical constructs in mathematics or philosophy. Nevertheless, it is everywhere an essential aspect of graduate education. The ease with which mentors are obtained, the structure that is in place for rewarding faculty for serving on doctoral committees, and the commitment of the institution to speeding students' progress towards a doctoral degree all play a role in enhancing graduate education.

"Distinguished faculty, talented students, and a well-considered curriculum are all necessary conditions for a graduate education of high quality."

One aspect of mentorship is helping graduate students to become members of their professions. Opportunities for professional development must be made available to students, they must be acknowledged as joint authors of publications where appropriate, and they must be encouraged to take part in national and international meetings. Whether students are being "professionalized" in an appropriate way by their departments and programs has an important bearing on the quality of their graduate education.

The amount and nature of the teaching done by graduate students also influence the quality of graduate education. Pertinent here are such questions as whether departmental expectations regarding the amount and duration of teaching assistantships are reasonable, whether students are given sufficient help with their teaching, and whether their teaching is adequately supervised. One must also consider the varieties and sources of graduate financial aid. Are there sufficient funds at the entry level and throughout the course of the doctoral program for students to complete a degree in a timely way? What about the trade-offs between teaching and research support? Ought some students to be awarded lucrative stipends in lieu of teaching responsibilities? Those who are not required to teach may be less qualified for academic positions upon graduation, as we have noticed in assessing our own experience in recruiting minority graduate students with multi-year fellowships that do not require teaching.

"Whether students are being 'professionalized' in an appropriate way by their departments and programs has an important bearing on the quality of their graduate education."

Moreover, since faculty generally give their teaching assistants special attention, decreasing graduate students' teaching responsibilities may decrease the amount of mentoring that they receive.

A sixth set of considerations influencing the quality of graduate education concern the "academic culture" of a department or program, by which is meant the intellectual and even the social context in which faculty and students interact. Do the physical conditions in a department provide adequate opportunities for interaction among graduate students and between graduate students and faculty? If a department is housed in an uncongenial setting, devoid of departmental common rooms, opportunities for students to discuss ideas informally with one another are greatly reduced. If faculty spend their time in their homes rather than in their offices, students' ties to them are generally weakened. A sense of community and collegiality among graduate students and between graduate students and faculty members can enhance the quality of a graduate program, though, in the end, it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for doing so.

"Those who are not required to teach may be less qualified for academic positions upon graduation . . ."

Another issue affecting the quality of the education in a critical way is whether graduate students are adequately counseled about their career goals. Do faculty see students at regular intervals to discuss their career aspirations in light of their academic performance? Perhaps still more important, are weaker graduate students being adequately counseled about their career prospects? It is as much a responsibility of faculty to "counsel out" students who have little chance of success in the academic world as it is to encourage those who have the requisite abilities. Though much lip service is paid to this objective, faculty are not always at their best and most objective either in reaching these decisions or in communicating them to their students.

"A sense of community and collegiality among graduate students and between graduate students and faculty members can enhance the quality of a graduate program . . ."

Finally, if graduate education of the highest quality can be said to require intellectual breadth as well as depth, the existence of adequate opportunities for research and teaching beyond a student's own department or programs increases its value. Are students encouraged to learn from faculty in other departments? Are students in different departments encouraged to learn from one another? Are interdisciplinary dissertations encouraged? The ability to understand and participate in the life of several academic cultures, which interdisciplinary work encourages, can make a significant difference in placement and throughout the course of an academic career.

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Improving Climate

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II. The Role of the Graduate School in Improving the Climate for Graduate Education

Given all these considerations, what can a graduate school do to demonstrate its commitment to all dimensions of quality in graduate education, especially at a large, heterogeneous research university such as The University of Michigan? We have initiated a convocation for newly-admitted graduate students at which issues such as the ethos of the research university and the importance of mentorship are discussed. The goal of the convocation is to raise the students' expectations about the graduate experience and their academic careers. We are initiating discussions in visits to graduate programs across the University to gain some idea of their strengths and the challenges that face them and to sense something of the cultures that can be fully understood only in the departments themselves. Data on student quality help to set the agenda, but we believe that asking questions that focus on the kind of graduate education a department is providing will encourage it to shape that education in more positive ways. During a departmental visit we can draw attention to curricular and pedagogical concerns that have been brought to our attention, and deal with issues of enrollment planning.

"we have helped to articulate the need for mentorship and have developed financial aid programs that focus attention on it as a way of underscoring its importance."

Financial support for graduate education is inadequate, even at a large institution such as The University of Michigan. Further, what aid is available is not fully at the Graduate School's disposal. We have, however, determined to use the financial aid that we do disperse thoughtfully and with an eye to serving more than one objective wherever possible. Four examples will help to illustrate our aims.

First, since faculty mentorship is acknowledged to be essential to graduate education, we have helped to articulate the need for mentorship and have developed financial aid programs that focus attention on it as a way of underscoring its importance. We have recently initiated the Research Partnership Program to support faculty research through the funding of graduate student research assistants. The evaluation process for these proposals considers not only the quality of the project, the scholarly achievements and potential of the faculty member, and the potential of the graduate student, but also the opportunities for increased intellectual exchange between faculty member and student that the project would provide. Only those projects that are of benefit to the student's career as well as that of the faculty member are funded.

"we sponsor symposia and other programs aimed at increasing communication across academic disciplines, whether by faculty, by graduate students, or, preferably, by both together."

Second, we have set aside some of our discretionary funds to support requests from departments and programs for whatever they believe will most enhance the climate for graduate education in their environment, perhaps visiting speakers to serve as catalysts to bring various components of large departments together. We have expanded our budget for travel to help graduate students who may wish to read papers at meetings or conferences become involved in their professions early in their careers.

"we have focused attention on excellence by offering awards to outstanding teaching assistants and for distinguished dissertations"

Since we believe that excessive specialization in some graduate programs can be both narrowing and confining for students, we have also used our discretionary funding to sponsor symposia and other programs aimed at increasing communication across academic disciplines, whether by faculty, by graduate students or, preferably, by both together. We have also made a special effort to establish bonds among graduate students from different disciplines. Since we are able to draw upon endowment funds to offer dissertation fellowships to some sixty of the strongest predoctoral students across the campus, we have brought these students together to discuss the progress and methods of their research. To the extent that the Graduate School can be a focal point for lively intellectual interchange, we believe we can help to enlarge the faculty's sense of community as well as that of the graduate students.

"We have set aside some of our discretionary funds to support requests from departments and programs for whatever they believe will most enhance the climate for graduate education in their environment . . ."

Finally, we have focused attention on excellence by offering awards to outstanding teaching assistants and for distinguished dissertations. We have held interdisciplinary symposia around some new books published by our faculty, as a way of celebrating their work. These events reaffirm the importance of outstanding achievement, not only for those being honored, but also for the entire academic community. In that these awards and symposia are tangible evidence of a concern for quality, they help buttress the core academic values of the university itself.

"The ability to understand and participate in the life of several academic cultures, which interdisciplinary work encourages, can make a significant difference in placement and throughout the course of an academic career."

Contemporary research universities consist of a series of largely autonomous spheres: graduate education, undergraduate education, professional education, and faculty research. It is clear upon analysis, however, that these spheres are interconnected in myriad ways, both potentially and in fact, with the result that improving the climate for intellectual exchange in one area is likely to enhance it in all the others. Thus, fostering excellence in graduate programs can help improve the sense of intellectual community of the entire university. It is this that has ultimately been our objective. ●